

BOATING LANGUAGE - A NEW DISCOVERY
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

by Michael Parker M.A.

Recently while photographing old buildings in the riverside village of Stainforth, north-east of Doncaster, I was introduced to a retired miner who was born at Stainforth and who had in his youth been a boatman. He had lived and worked on his father's boat on the river Don (navigation) and on the Stainforth and Keadby canal, both of which pass through Stainforth.

Today Goole is the main inland port in Yorkshire, but readers will be aware that other riverside towns in the Humber system - for example Knottingley, York and Gainsborough - were the sites of wharves which were frequented by river and coastal shipping even in the present century. The vessels which used these small ports included canal barges which travelled far inland on the canals and "navigations" which were mostly constructed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹

My informant was one of the last of Stainforth's representatives of the boatmen and wharfemen who worked in these riverside places. I was introduced to him by his nephew who explained that the old man knew a great deal about the buildings of the village, on which I was then working. But I soon realised that I had chanced upon something far more important, though I could not explain it. So I encouraged him to chat about boats and his boating past.

At the time I had been doing some standard "oldest inhabitant" dialectology in the neighbouring village of Fishlake, where the dialect is quite well preserved among the older generation. Fishlake lies on the boundary between South Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire speech, so as might be expected more than one realisation of a single Middle English vowel was often used.

It was puzzling that this variation was not random, but very specifically depended on which of my local informants I was listening to, with perhaps three types or groups.

Groups defined by M.E. \bar{u} , M.E. \bar{o}_3 , M.E. \bar{e}_3 , M.E. \bar{o}_1 .

- (1) (a) usually out [aʊt], sometimes aht [a:t] OUT
 (b) usually cooal [kʊəl], ooal [ʊəl] COAL, HOLE
 (c) usually meeat [mɪət], eeat [ɪət], seldom meyt [mɛɪt], eyt [ɛɪt], MEAT, EAT
 (d) usually boots [bu:ts], seldom booits [bʊɪts] BOOTS
- (2) (a) usually out [aʊt], sometimes aht [a:t], occasionally oot [u:t] and [ʊt] OUT
 (b) cooal [kʊəl], ooal [ʊəl] but often coil [kɔɪl], oil [ɔɪl], COAL, HOLE
 (c) both meeat [mɪət], eeat [ɪət] and meyt [mɛɪt] eyt [ɛɪt], MEAT, EAT
 (d) often booits [bʊɪts] as well as boots [bu:ts] BOOTS
- (3) (a) aht [a:t] and [a:ʊt] also out [aʊt] (never oot [u:t]), OUT
 (b) kooal [kʊəl], ooal [ʊəl] (never [ɔɪ]) COAL, HOLE
 (c) meeat [mɪət], eeat [ɪət] (never [ɛɪ]) MEAT, EAT
 (d) boots [bu:ts] (never [ʊɪ]) BOOTS

The first group is, I think, probably a "refined" version of the second. The informants in the first group included land-owning farmers and craftsmen, while the second type of dialect was especially characteristic of two men who had been farm labourers in their younger days. It seems that the "West Riding" usages spread into the Fishlake area from the west, reaching a kind of high water mark there or a few miles further north-east in relatively modern times, without entirely superseding the "Lincolnshire" pronunciations. During this century however the association of the "West Riding" pronunciations with the colliery districts has meant their elimination from the mixed speech of many locals, leaving the Lincolnshire usages on their own again. This process seems to have gone hand in hand with some

modification of the dialect by standard influence and also with the disappearance of Fishlake's relic northern farms. I was puzzled however by the third group of Fishlake informants, which consisted of three brothers, because they chose the West Riding pronunciation for out but the Lincolnshire type for *meat* and *coal*.

When I met the boatman at Stainforth, it struck me at once that he spoke quite differently from the inhabitants of Fishlake, barely a mile away. His speech reminded me of the family in group three, and a check in my notes later revealed that their parents had come from Stainforth, and had had river "connections". This explained some of the Fishlake variation (group three), but not the pre-existing difference between Fishlake and Stainforth - a linguistic geographer might have put thirty miles between them. But all the informants had impeccable local qualifications, and undoubtedly their speech represented the genuine usages of their communities. Was it something to do with the rivermen and their way of life?

The technical terminology which the Stainforth boatman used was impressive, and fully integrated into his general dialect. I devised a questionnaire for boating words, and tried it out on informants in Stainforth and neighbouring Thorne, which is also a riverside town. The results have been exceptionally interesting. The spoken dialect of the few remaining boatmen is often remarkably well preserved, probably because illiteracy lasted as long as commercial canal transport. In the early nineteenth century, many canal men began to live on their boats, along with their families, and they withdrew somewhat from landbound society. At first as self-employed carriers or as skippers for companies, they might claim to be doing well for themselves, but as canal transport declined, so did their status, and mobility meant little or no schooling for their children. They became a rather isolated social and cultural group.

With this transport background it was obvious to suppose that the group three or boatmen's type dialect had been introduced whole from another area, but this does not seem to be the case. The boatmen's dialect is also spoken in Thorne, and there I have been able to study a larger number of informants. The pronunciation

aht [a:t] and [a:ʔt] for OUT, resemble the *Survey of English Dialects* results from the Trent Valley area between Gainsborough and Newark, as do [naɪt] *night*, [brʌɪt] *bright*, contrasting with South Yorkshire's usual neet [nɛ:t] etc. These do not seem to be simply modern standard introductions, since there is [θaɪt] *thight* ("watertight", cf. *theat* or *theet* for [θɛ:t] in north-east Yorkshire)² and this word is a relic, not recorded in South Yorkshire dialects except among the boatmen. But in contrast some Yorkshire and West Riding forms are in constant use, for example *snaw* [snɔ:] = *snow*, and *blaw* [blɔ:] = *blow* (of the wind), where part of Lincolnshire (including the Trent Valley south of Gainsborough) has *snow* [snɔʊ], *blow* [blɔʊ]. The boatmen have *waay* [wɛə] *way*, *gaate* [gɛət] *gate* more often than southern West Riding *gate* [ge:t] *way* [we:]; in this they resemble the Fishlake informants. The Lincolnshire type forms in *gate*, *way*, *coal*, *meat* are quite different from the usages of the Sheffield and Rotherham areas, so this dialect was not created by the canalisation of the Don (to Tinsley in the eighteenth century, and subsequently to Sheffield). Nor do I think that the boatmen's speech descends from an old urban dialect of Doncaster, which was until the 1740s the highest point on the Don navigable to commercial traffic. It seems unlikely that nineteenth century Doncaster would have stuck to the "broadest" place-name forms (see below), but earlier than that the town's speech probably had oo [u:] in *out*, *cow* etc., since there were slight relics of this pronunciation in neighbouring villages until the start of the present century.³ According to Ellis, (*EEP* p.406) Doncaster had [e:] in *gate*, *tale*, which does not agree with the boatmen's frequent [ɛə] type, and usually [aʊ] in *out*, *down*, which contrasts with the boatmen's regular [a:].⁴ The areas in which the developments *blaw* [blɔ:] *blow* and [θaɪt] *thight* (= watertight) are found do not overlap in their distributions at any point, and other forms are used consistently though they are scarcely compatible in geographical terms. We seem to have a *koiné* of unknown age and origin. I cannot say whether the change to "on board" living created it, or simply preserved it down to modern times.

But the *koiné* has certainly existed for a long while. These people use some of the best preserved

dialect grammar in South Yorkshire, equalling the villages west of Barnsley, with such archaisms as *ta'e* [tɛə] *take*, *ta'ed* [tɛəd] (= took), *ta'en* [tɛən] *taken*, *maay* [mɛə] *MAKE*, *mooaslins* [mʊəsli:nz] (= mostly, common a little farther north but not in this district) *nivvers-'ardlins* [nɪvəzɑ:dlɪnz] (= very seldom). They also use traditional pronunciations such as *starn* [sta:n] *stern*, *sheeat* [ʃiət] (= sheet, the rope, from O.E. *sceata*; as this pronunciation shows, this word should be more properly spelt *sheat*), *timmer-eeads* [tɪmɛrlɛdz] *timberheads*. They are consistent in their use of older place-name pronunciations, *Oldruck* [ɔldrɛk] for *Aldwark*, *Cunsber* [kʊnzbe] for *Conisbrough*, *Botton Staather* [bɒtn stɛəðə] for *Burton Stather*. They also say *Kinlurst* [kɪnlɛst] for *Kilnhurst* and *Sprodbber* [sprɒdbɛ] for *Sprotborough*, pronunciations which are no longer found in the vicinity of these places.⁵

With all this in mind I decided to expand the research beyond Stainforth and Thorne to find boatmen in the towns and villages of the Humber river-system and associated canals. So far I have visited Gainsborough, Goole, Mexborough and Knottingley, but without finding any community of boatmen such as those at Thorne. Possibly this boatmen's dialect is especially preserved on the Don, because barge transport survived as a marginally worthwhile occupation for a long period, in contrast to Gainsborough on the Trent where the involvement of Hull shipping companies seems to have caused the disappearance of any community of local boatmen by the end of the last century.

River transport from some of these places has a long history. During the last few hundred years boatmen have tended to congregate at certain sites and avoid others. Thus there are none today in Fishlake but sixteenth century wills show a large boating community there which must have moved away later, perhaps to Thorne where boatmen were making wills in the seventeenth.⁶ Stainforth had a market in 1347 and was involved in commercial boating in late medieval times.⁷ Knottingley, Ferry Fryston, Doncaster, Crowle and Gainsborough seem to have been inland ports in the same period, and there is archaeological evidence for the bulk transport of pottery in Roman times, surely by water, between the Scunthorpe area and a market at

Doncaster.⁸

The technical terminology may provide some clues to the age of the boating communities and the origin of their dialect. There are Dutch words, such as [ɔɔl] "hol" of which *hold* (in a boat) is a false correction, [dɛnɪnz] *dennings*, the planking between cabin and bilges, a word which is in no English dictionary but which I traced in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (the Dutch equivalent of OED) as *Denning*, plural *Denningen*, one of the meanings being "the planking between hold and bilges", almost exactly that used at Stainforth and Thorne. Scandinavian words include *grain(s)* [gɹænz], [gɹe:nz] - the hook on a boathook - which appears in this sense in the *English Dialect Dictionary* for a Trent valley location (Norse *greinn*), *gime* [gaɪm] - a kind of riverside pond - (gíma), *windas* or *winniss* [wɪnɪs] "windlass" from Norse *windáss* (better than the adoption via French given in OED). But most of the terminology is English. The forms of such words as *strooak* [stɹʊæk] "strake" (possibly a hypercorrection based on confusion near the Middle English ā - ō boundary), *cooamins* [kʊəmɪnz] *coamings*, *lether* [lɛðə] = *ladder*, (Fishlake has *stee* [stɛ:], with *ladder* [ladə] from Standard English, and in S.E.D. *lether* [lɛðə] is a Nottinghamshire-mid Lincolnshire form), *ockem* [ɔkəm], = *oakum*, *fane* [fe:n] and [fɛən], = *weathervane*, *ruther* [ɹʊðə] = *rudder*, *faddom* [fadm] = *fathom*, show that the terminology is thoroughly assimilated to the dialect and has been in use for centuries. If these were agricultural terms, it would be assumed that many were "native" to the district, i.e. that they had been in use since Anglo-Saxon times.

I hope to carry out further research into the two aspects, terminological and social, of boating dialect, to answer the fascinating questions posed by the preliminary work. Meanwhile I have deposited a copy of my questionnaire with the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies in the Department of English at Leeds University and at the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield. Anyone who is able to carry out recordings in phonetic script is welcome to copy the questionnaire and use it to collect inland waterways dialect in all parts of the country, the only extra requirement being a few detailed pictures of

various kinds of boats and of rivers, bridges etc., several well-known books about canals, river-boats and barges contain suitable examples and should be widely available in public libraries. With the permission of the author, Dr P. Wright, I have incorporated those parts of the fishing questionnaire published in this Journal in 1964 which are not otherwise duplicated in my manuscript questionnaire into it so that in coastal areas where both questionnaires are relevant, an integrated series of questions may be asked. I have included questions on cultural matters and on landmarks and place-names, to vary the conversation with the informants and include more than conventional dialect in the information received. Finally I suggest that if there are sufficient willing informants in a location the fieldworkers might like to proceed to books four to nine of the Survey of English Dialects, in view of the possible social and cultural aspect of boatmen's dialect described above. I hope that the subject of boatmen's dialect will be regarded as suitable for student dissertations and theses, as well as for the research projects of university academics and others.

NOTES

- 1 There are many canal histories, for example Hadfield C., *The Canals of Yorkshire and North-East England* (2 parts, Newton Abbott, 1979) and Gladwin D.D., *The Waterways of Britain, a Social Panorama* (London, 1976). Paget Tomlinson E.W., *Britain's Canal and River Craft* (Ashborne, 1979) contains a series of clear illustrations.
- 2 See under *theat* adj., in EDD.
- 3 in about SED Tickhill, in *house*, *cow*, my own recordings at Barnburgh and Campsall, in *cow*, *brow* ditto at Conisbrough. In the same area there are traces of [ɔə] in [kɔəl] *coal* and of [ʌə] in [mʌet] *meat*, which may be relics of a Doncaster koiné, see text and note 4.
- 4 Ellis (EEP 406-7) notes [ʌə] in *eat* [ɔə] in *coal* and [snɔ:] for *snow* at Doncaster. Forms which do agree with the Boatmens' usages.
- 5 [kɔnzɒə] seems to go back to a form represented by the spelling *Cunsburgh* of 1505 (Smith's *Place-Names of the West Riding* pt.1, p.126, [spɔɔdbə] is *Sprodburgh* 1525, ib. p.64.
- 6 This appears from the *Indexes to Wills in the York Registry* published in the Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, from a scan of the lists for testators described as boatman, keelman, etc.
- 7 Hey D., *The Making of South Yorkshire* (Ashborne, 1979) p.71 with quotation from De la Pryme's unpublished *History of Hatfield*.
- 8 All this is discussed in Parker M., *The Archaeology and history of South Yorkshire and neighbouring areas from the fifth to eleventh centuries A.D.*, M.A.

dissertation, Centre for Medieval Studies,
University of Leeds, section G, pp.29-34.

- ⁹ Wright P., "Proposal for a short questionnaire
for use in fishing communities", *TYDS* 11 (1964)
27-32.